

POLICY BRIEF 1

FROM INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION TO
INTEGRATION:

GAPS IN POLICY AND SUPPORT

This policy brief is relevant for:

- Fedasil and the State Secretary for Asylum and Migration
- Vlaamse Agentschappen Integratie en Inburgering
- Service Public Wallon Intérieur et Action sociale
- COCOM (Common Community Commission, Brussels)
- CPAS/OCMW and their Municipalities

REFUFAM examines the **effects of government policies on the integration trajectories of refugee families**. These *Policy Briefs* are based on interviews and focus groups with 98 members of refugee families, and with 99 street-level practitioners and local experts. By *refugee families* we understand families in which at least one person has acquired international protection, either through refugee status or subsidiary protection.

SUMMARY

When applicants for International Protection receive their protected status, they and their families **enter a period of transition before embarking on their integration trajectories**. This corresponds to a transition between

¹ The families we met had arrived before the current reception crisis. The difficulties that we raise in this Policy Brief are most likely to be amplified for families that arrived later.

different levels of governance: reception structures are organised at the Federal level while integration is organised by the regions, the communities and the municipalities. Our research shows that this is a **challenging period for refugee families as they try to navigate Belgium's complex institutional landscape**. This renders them dependent on volunteers, chance encounters and their compatriots, and often causes unnecessary setbacks in their integration trajectories. Drawing on both original and previous research, we point to **innovative practices**, and we make several **recommendations**, including the development of **transit infrastructures** that combine temporary housing with transversal support, and the **appointment of social workers within collective reception centres** who are responsible for guiding refugee families in the first steps of their integration trajectory.

POLICY

After receiving protected status, refugees must leave the accommodation provided to them by Fedasil and/or its partners within two months (renewable once). ¹ In this period, they find themselves in between policies that are organised on different levels. As applicants for international protection, they were subject to the Federal government, while as refugees they become subject to integration policies that are organised by the regions, communities and municipalities. In Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, **their registration in the formal integration trajectory can only start once they have taken up residence in a specific municipality**.

On a practical level, we know that social workers embedded in (Federal) reception centres, and those embedded in CPAS/OCMW² have neither the adequate resources nor the formal responsibility to guide refugee families through this early phase of the integration trajectory. While social

²See the Belspo study [Services pour les primo-arrivants dans les CPAS belges: enseignements pour la politique générale](#)

workers embedded in Local Accommodation Initiatives (LAIs/LOIs) – small-scale housing funded by the Federal level and managed by CPAS/OCMW and/or NGOs – had a more substantial responsibility to guide refugee families in this transitional period, the Federal government has dramatically decreased their numbers over the past few years, and they also seem to lack the resources needed to accomplish this mission.³

As a result, refugee families’ access to institutional support is lowest at a moment that is particularly crucial for an adequate start of their integration trajectory. Instead of taking a jumpstart, they find themselves spending their time and energy on navigating Belgium’s complicated institutional landscape⁴ to address their elementary needs: housing, the safety of their family, and their access to social rights more generally. In addition, the quality and quantity of the support they receive varies greatly, and their ability to find it is often a matter of sheer luck. As a result, **these first steps on their integration trajectories are governed in a way that is neither efficient nor effective.**

FINDINGS

1. The ‘chance’ of finding support

Once applicants for International Protection receive a positive decision on their application, they tend to have two priorities: 1) finding an official place of residence, so that they can gain access to public services and to their social rights; and 2) starting and completing a procedure for family reunification, so that their closest relatives are safe. As long as these priorities are not addressed, they often cannot fully embark on their integration trajectories for administrative and/or psychosocial reasons - See the Policy Briefs 5 and 10 on Housing and on Family Reunification.

While this transitional phase between applying for International Protection and the effective start of their integration trajectories appears to be crucial, it is precisely then that refugees and their families struggle to find access to public services.

How easily people find access to either informal or formal support depends on three factors. A first factor is the **contact language, especially** for persons who do not master any of the official languages, and who have not had enough time to master the local language - see Policy Brief 9 on Language & Public Services. Although some municipalities and CPAS/OCMW use a translation service, this practice is not very widespread. Our interlocutors mentioned the need to find someone to translate all the administrative documents they receive (for schools, medical care, registration with the municipality and CPAS/OCMW...), explain the procedures, help them "fill in the paperwork", guide them to institutions, accompany them to appointments and act as a relay with both landlords and administrations.

Before the first year, you need someone to translate (...) because the first year is difficult, there are a lot of letters, you need someone to explain.
(Syrian mother, 2.12.2022)

The families we spoke with often mentioned that **volunteers** played a crucial role in offering support and translation in these early stages. And refugees themselves, over time, tend to act as volunteers for newcomers experiencing the same difficulties as they did. The Syrian mother from the quote above, for instance, regularly acted as a voluntary translator for newly arriving families, eight years after her own arrival in Belgium.

³See Fedasil (2025) [Réseau d'accueil pour demandeurs d'asile en Belgique](#). There were 6014 places in January 2020; 4534 in January 2024. See also the report from Myria [La migration en chiffres et en droits](#).

⁴ Vandermeersch, H., Mescoli, E., Lafleur, J.-M., & De Cuyper, P. (Eds). (2023). *Newcomers navigating the welfare state. Experiences of immigrants and street-level bureaucrats with Belgium’s social assistance system.* Leuven

It should also be noted that in Brussels, language difficulties seem to be less pronounced due to the multilingual nature of the city. As explained by a Syrian father,

Here in Brussels it's not difficult to find someone who speaks Arabic everywhere. At the municipality you find someone who speaks Arabic. At the CPAS, too. It's very difficult, but I did the paperwork almost by myself.

(Syrian father, 06.03.2024)

A **second factor** shaping refugee families' access to support is the **social environment of the reception centres** in which they reside during their application. On the one hand, refugee families who reside in reception centres that are located in major cities such as Brussels, find relatively easy access to a range formal and informal actors that operate within the local area proximity.

In addition, refugee families who were sheltered in **urban centres** during the application already had the opportunity to identify the administrations they will need to go to, to follow language courses, and to develop informal contacts.

We were almost integrated into Belgian society before we took out the papers. There's a lot we know because we lived at the Red Cross here.

(Palestinian mother, 02.12.2022)

On the other hand, refugee families who had been living in **isolated reception centres, find it more difficult to start their integration trajectories**, as they are both far from the institutions they need to go to for their formalities, and have not yet had the opportunity to forge the social ties that can make up for the lack of formal support. Families we met evoked the absence of language courses or of training, the difficulties in terms of mobility, and the feeling of social isolation.

A **third factor** shaping refugee families' access to support, is the **absence or presence of "informed" peers or volunteers** in their immediate surroundings, on whom they can rely to support them in their search for **housing, family reunification**, and in taking important **administrative steps**.

"The first year was very difficult, but when I met Mrs D., my neighbour, life started to get easier. Because I always need information. She always helps me".

(Syrian mother, 21.11.22)

The **role of pioneers** – i.e., persons who have already settled as immigrants themselves - must also be highlighted: they guide families towards NGO's that can help them, they accompany families to appointments, they translate between them and government institutions, and they explain to refugee families what their legal rights and obligations are.

Our research shows that **families who were unable to count on such support from volunteers and pioneers, find it much more difficult to get through the transition phase**. An Afghan family of 7 persons, who arrived in 2018 after a very long family reunification procedure, lived during the transition phase in a studio flat, with no income. 'We stayed 8 months with no money, nothing, no one to help us' (interview with Afghan family, 23.12.2022). They didn't know any volunteers, and experienced a multitude of problems in taking up their social rights.

Another factor that could improve families' ability to navigate the institutional landscape during the period of transition is the **possibility of attending integration courses during the application for international protection**, as highlighted during a workshop with refugee families:

[The integration course] should be from the moment you arrive, it would be much more interesting because it allows you to function and know where you're going, and understand a lot of things that we only understand now.

(Refugee in the integration program, 01.03.2023)

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

In Brussels, where the network of associations is more developed, **some NGOs have specialised in offering support to refugee families during this transitional phase**. Convivial,

for example, offers transversal support in refugee families' mother *tongue*, even before they leave the reception centre. After an initial interview to identify needs, they support them in finding accommodation, starting up administrative steps, and family reunification.

To find housing, these associations act as mediators (by calling landlords, accompanying people during visits and the signing of lease contracts, and by setting up networks of landlords). And they support families financially by ensuring a rental guarantee for the first month's rent. For the most vulnerable families, they offer access to transit housing (see Policy Brief 5 on Housing).

They support refugee families in taking the necessary **administrative hurdles** such as registering with the CPAS/OCMW and the municipality, and initiating contact with health care providers, banks, schools, etc. They typically work in partnership with around 160 CPAS-OCMWs. Some NGOs (e.g., Convivial) also support families in **during family reunification procedures** and more general forms of **information about legal procedures**.

Caritas is developing similar projects as Convivial, **combining transit housing for vulnerable families with transversal support during the transition phase**. This support extends across several months, to enable a smoother transition, in several Belgian cities. In Brussels, Singa offers accommodation that is shared between refugee families and settled citizens, and trains "admin buddies" who support people in all their administrative tasks (understanding and completing documents, accompanying them to appointments, etc.).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For the **Ministries and Departments of Housing** in the Regions of Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels, as well as the

Federal **State Secretary of Asylum and Migration** and **Fedasil**:

- Invest in a **"transit infrastructure"** for refugee families when leaving Fedasil's reception network. As this is a crucial phase to start up their integration trajectory, this should include guidance through Belgium's institutional complexity information about their rights, and support to find housing. The **social workers** involved in these transit infrastructures **should act as intermediaries** with local (i.e. CPAS/OCMW) and regional (AGII, CRI, BAPA) public services, with whom they will have to register as soon as they have an address;

For the Federal **State Secretary of Asylum and Migration** and **Fedasil**:

- **Appoint one social worker in each reception centre who has a responsibility to provide "exit support"** which includes facilitating contact with local and regional public services;
- **Increase and stabilize the ILA/LOI network**, as proposed by CPAS/OCMW's⁵ ;
- **Increase the length of time of accommodation of refugee families in ILAs/LOIs**, and ensure they receive support in finding housing and administrative procedures;

For the Regional Agencies and Ministries of Integration in Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders:

- Enable applicants for international protection to **participate in civic integration courses during their application**.

For **Municipalities and CPAS/OCMW**:

- Invest time and resources into **formal collaborations between the CPAS/OCMW and the various actors**

⁵ See [the letter that the federation of CPAS addressed to the Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration](#).

involved in the reception of refugees, to ensure better coordination of support during the transition phase;

- Ensure **translation services** for families who do not speak the national languages, at least in the first year after receiving international protection, to help them understand administrative formalities and facilitate their relations with local services (municipalities, CPAS/OCMW, mutual health insurance...) – see Policy Brief 9 on Language & Public Services.

FURTHER READINGS

- Caritas, (2011). « [Accompagnement sur mesure: clé d'une intégration réussie. Rapport de deux ans d'expérience avec des réfugiés ayant obtenu leur statut en centre fermé](#) ».
- Carlier, L. (2024). Hospitality experience and inclusion trajectories of refugee families in Tournai. *Refufam Working Paper 1*.
- Ciré, (2023). « [Comment sortir de la crise de l'accueil ?](#) ».
- Vandermeerschen, H., Mescoli, E., Lafleur, J-M., & De Cuyper, P. Eds. (2023). *Newcomers navigating the welfare state. Experiences of immigrants and street-level bureaucrats with Belgium's social assistance system*. Leuven.
- Wyckaert, E., Leinfelder, H., & De Decker, P. (2020). 'Stuck in the middle: The transition from shelter to housing for refugees.' *Transactions of the Association of European Schools of Planning*, 4, 80-94.

AUTHORS

Dr. Louise Carlier, Researcher
l.carlier@uclouvain.be

Prof. Mathieu Berger, Promoter
m.berger@uclouvain.be

Dr. Giacomo Orsini, Coordinator
Giacomo.orsini@ugent.be

Prof. Robin Vandevordt, Principal Investigator
Robin.vandevordt@ugent.be

With many thanks to all our interlocutors and other experts for sharing their insights with us.

www.REFUFAM.be